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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAR ES SALAAM 001015

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E AND INR/AA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SCUL](#) [TZ](#)

SUBJECT: Zanzibar's Imams Declare a Truce

Classified by Pol-Econ Chief Judy Buelow for reason  
1.4(b)

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C) 04 Dar es Salaam 1036, D) 04 Dar es Salaam 691

1. (C) Summary: Religious tension on Zanzibar has declined in recent months, even as political tension has increased. Only fourteen months ago, a series of small explosions rocked Stonetown. Back then, government officials publicly blamed Uamsho, a fundamentalist Muslim NGO that had a history of staging confrontational demonstrations against Zanzibar's Office of the Mufti. The Uamsho activists who were arrested were quickly released without charge, however, and the bombing episode opened a new era of understanding among Zanzibar's religious factions. In the following year, Uamsho was invited into a dialogue with the Office of the Mufti about amending Zanzibar's Mufti Law. Although no change to the law seems imminent, the Imams from the civil service are now friendly with their fundamentalist NGO counterparts; both sides seem to be making an effort to avoid provoking each other. Meanwhile, both the Office of the Mufti and Uamsho are focusing on Zanzibar's upcoming elections: the Mufti's office, by planning a civic education campaign; Uamsho, by publicizing allegations of human rights abuses occurring during the voter registration. End Summary.

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A Vocal Fringe Group Draws Attention  
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2. (U) Uamsho, or "Islamic Awakening," is among the most vocal of Zanzibar's small fundamentalist organizations. Registered as an NGO in 1999, Uamsho is active almost exclusively in Unguja Island's Stonetown, and consists of a few dozen relatively young clerics with a Saudi Wahabist orientation. Uamsho's membership overlaps with that of Answar Sunni, a sect that accepts religious authority only from the Saudi Mufti. It is also worth mentioning that most Uamsho activists claim Arab ancestry and hail from Zanzibar's Pemba Island, since both characteristics are strongly associated with support for the opposition CUF party. Uamsho is nonetheless careful to disassociate itself from any political party. Uamsho's tiny membership is not typical of the vast majority of Zanzibari Muslims, who practice a tolerant, moderate form of Islam incorporating many local traditions. It's likely that many Zanzibaris view Uamsho's youthful clerics as sanctimonious, foreign-influenced upstarts.

3. (SBU) Uamsho vociferously rejects Zanzibar's Mufti, and objects to the 2001 Mufti Law. This law established the Office of the Mufti as a branch of the Zanzibari government, and gave the Mufti considerable legal authority over Muslim religious affairs on Zanzibar. Uamsho, and its members from the Answar Sunni sect, typically observe the major Muslim holidays on the day announced by Saudi Mufti, rather than the Zanzibari Mufti. Uamsho typically refuses to obtain permits for its public demonstrations, because it objects to the law requiring Muslim NGOs to request the permit from the Mufti's office rather than from the Ministry of Home Affairs. In years past, police have violently dispersed Uamsho's demonstrations and public religious observations; Uamsho tends to relish the confrontation and the resulting publicity.

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Bizarre Attacks Put Spotlight on Uamsho  
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4. (U) Everything is politicized on Zanzibar and the Government, dominated by the ruling CCM party, views Uamsho as a stalking horse for the opposition CUF party. Just over a year ago, when a series of small explosions rocked Zanzibar's Stonetown, several Zanzibari government officials publicly linked

Uamsho and the CUF party, and blamed both for the attacks. Dozens of activists from both the NGO and the political party were arrested, but all were eventually released without charge. (For the record, during a three-week period in March, 2004, small charges of dynamite damaged a bus belonging to a Christian school, some electrical installations, and the houses of the Mufti and of other government officials; a dud grenade was also tossed into a crowded restaurant frequented by tourists. There were no injuries and damages were minimal.)

15. (C) The government's accusations against Uamsho are part of a longstanding pattern, in which the CCM attempts to portray CUF as the party of Islamic extremism and violence. (Reftel B) Uamsho itself might have provided the Zanzibari government with a convenient fundamentalist target: just days before the bombings started in March 2004, Uamsho had held one of its trademark illegal demonstrations. There was considerable publicity when police broke up Uamsho's demonstration and arrested some participants. Having just raised their profile as Islamic rabble-rousers, Uamsho's activists became the obvious suspects when the bombings began. The real perpetrators of the attacks have never been identified, much less convicted. (Please see Reftels C and D for background on the 2004 attacks and their aftermath.)

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Uamsho Uses its Visibility for Political Leverage  
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16. (C) Last year's bombings and the accusations catapulted Uamsho into national prominence, and briefly, into the international spotlight. Suddenly, the international press came calling on Uamsho's cramped offices in a quiet back alley of Stonetown. So did foreign diplomats, including Embassy poloff and the DCM from the British High Commission. The diplomats urged Uamsho's leaders and their rivals in the Mufti's office to open a dialogue about the issues they disputed. For a few weeks in 2004, the foreign press carried reports about the Zanzibar explosions, and Uamsho's suspected role in them. Since then, Uamsho's clerics have found a place in the rolodexes of foreign journalists, becoming reliable, accessible spokesmen for Muslim fundamentalists on Zanzibar. In a May 17 visit to Uamsho's offices, poloff noted that the only other visitors who had signed the guest book in the previous month were journalists, including reporters from Reuters and the BBC.

17. (C) Uamsho also values its contact with the US and British diplomatic missions. Although Uamsho's clerics do not agree with many of our international policies, particularly the Iraq war, they do see foreign diplomatic missions as valuable allies that can provide recognition to the NGO and leverage in its dealings with the Zanzibari Government. Recent Uamsho press releases highlighted the NGO's contact with foreign diplomatic missions. Uamsho also publicly called on the US Embassy to press the Zanzibari government to halt alleged abuses against Zanzibaris of Pemban origin.

18. (C) In the last year, Zanzibar's religious disputes have cooled, even as the political campaign began to heat up. Most of the usual flashpoints for conflict have simply failed to ignite. The Answar Sunni sect publicly observed Idd al Fitr during the "wrong" days in November, and did so without any interference from the authorities. Uamsho still refuses to request permits for its demonstrations from the Office of the Mufti, but it has refrained from street-level confrontations.

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The Clerics Open a Dialogue on the Mufti Law  
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19. (C) Officials in the Zanzibar government and leaders in Uamsho quietly confirmed that they were discussing amendment of the controversial Mufti Law. In a February meeting at the Ministry of Good Governance, which supervises the Office of the Mufti, an official told poloff that the Ministry had established a Review Committee on the Mufti Law. The official said that the Government had approved the Law in 2001 because it was concerned about the threat of Islamic terrorism in East Africa and wanted to control fundamentalism. He said that Zanzibar's fundamentalist groups, which were tiny and not typical of the Muslim majority, had

vigorously objected to the law. It was important to "listen to the NGOs," the official said, so the Review Committee was seeking input from Uamsho and other religiously-oriented NGOs. In the May 17 meeting, Uamsho Executive Committees member Samahi confirmed the meetings at the Ministry of Good Governance. Uamsho representatives first met with Adam Mwanjuki, when he was the Minister, and then with his replacement, Ahmed Hassan Diria. Samahi said the process stalled after Diria's death early in 2005, but he thought that Uamsho might eventually resume discussion with Acting Minister Shamhuna.

10. (C) Clerics in the Office of the Mufti have also reached out to the dissenting Imams of Uamsho. Sheikh Soraga, who directs most of the Offices' programs, told poloff that he had met upwards of four leaders of Uamsho on five different occasions. He made the rather extraordinary statement that "We (in the Mufti's Office) are no longer enemies with Uamsho." Soraga is still trying to convince Uamsho's leaders that the Mufti Law is constitutional; Uamsho still refuses to ask the Mufti for permits to hold its demonstrations. These disagreements notwithstanding, Sheikh Soraga said that Uamsho's Imams were now on friendly terms with those in the Mufti's Office: he noted that they all greet each other in public, although they had never done so before.

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The Imams Focus on Election-Year Politics  
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11. (U) For now, all of the Imams have put their disputes over religious policies on the back burner, the better to focus on election-year political issues. Uamsho has turned to human rights advocacy; specifically, calling the attention of the press and foreign embassies to abuses committed against presumed opposition supporters during Zanzibar's voter registration period. (Please see reftel A for a summary of the meeting Uamsho arranged with poloff and three individuals arrested under Operation Dondola.) The civil servants in the Mufti's office are attempting to use their network of clerics to disseminate civic education throughout the islands in advance of the elections. Sheik Soraga said that the Office of the Mufti was in contact with leaders of Zanzibar's miniscule Christian population and with the World Conference on Religion and Peace. He said that he would soon submit a proposal to USAID for an ecumenical group of clergy to conduct seminars on civic education and civic peace for Zanzibar's fractious political leaders.

12. (C) Comment: The Zanzibari Government moves at a glacial pace even in the best of times. Although elements of the Mufti Law pose real concerns for religious freedom, the law is not likely to be amended any time soon. The new truce between Zanzibar's religious establishment and its most vocal group of religious dissidents is nonetheless a positive development: for now, dialogue has replaced confrontation on the streets. Uamsho's new status is another positive development. Probably, we will never know if Uamsho had any involvement in last year's fire-bombings. But if Uamsho was ever inclined to violence, it is much less so now that it has secured a place in Zanzibar's policy debates and ready access to the media. The focus on electoral politics by Muslim clerics across the spectrum is another intriguing development, especially since the civil servants in the Office of the Mufti presumably support the CCM, and Uamsho is still perceived as a stand-in for the opposition CUF. If the 2005 elections are again disputed, it's not inconceivable that the Imams would offer to mediate a solution to the resulting chaos and political deadlock. It's doubtful, however, if either the Mufti's Office or Uamsho has the administrative capacity or political clout to effectively fill that role. End comment.

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